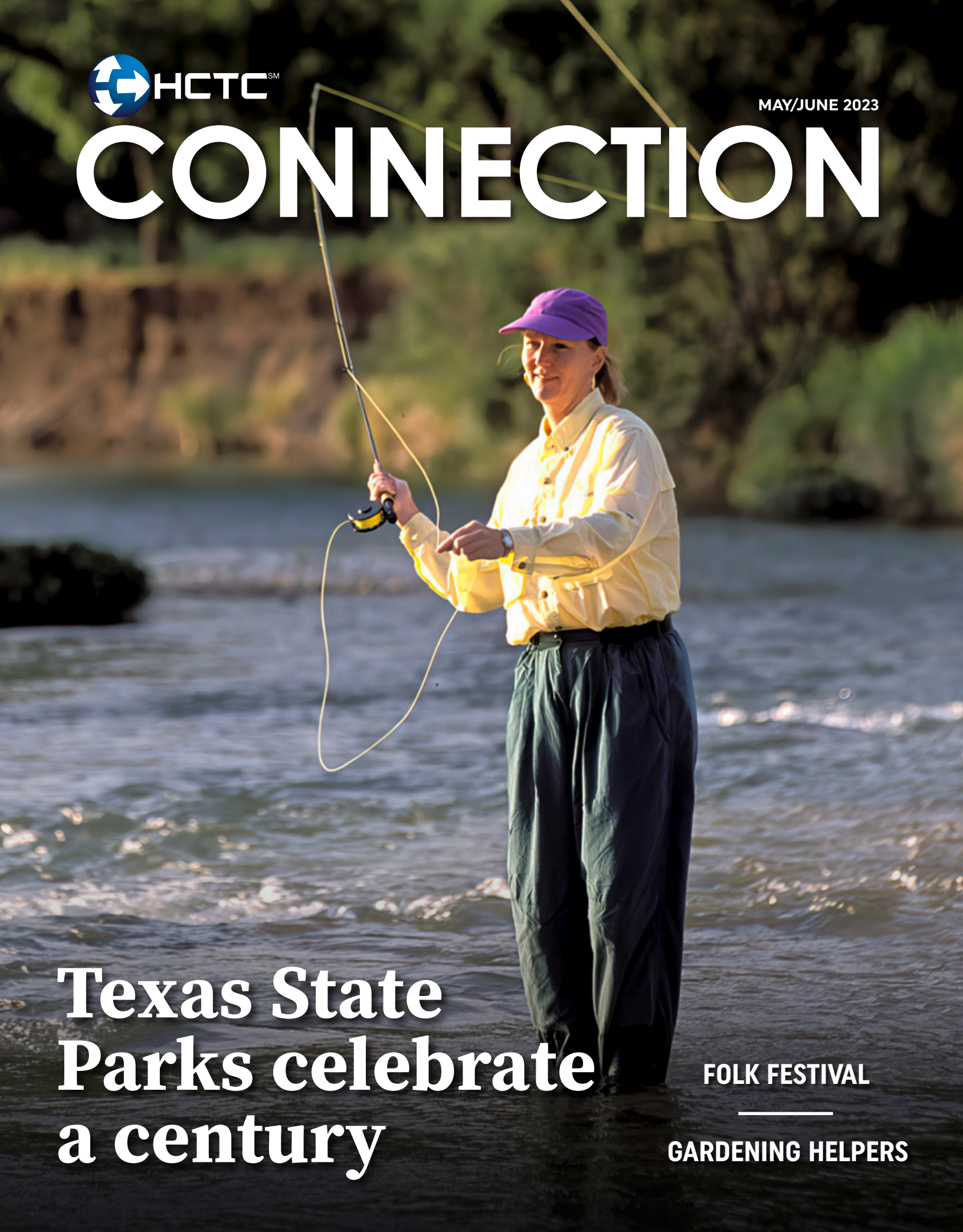




MAY/JUNE 2023

CONNECTION



**Texas State
Parks celebrate
a century**

FOLK FESTIVAL

GARDENING HELPERS



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Training broadband professionals

New NTCA partnership will make a difference

As rural communities like yours experience the life-changing benefits of fast, reliable internet service, the NTCA is proud to expand its support of the professionals making these innovations possible.

We are partnering with Northwood Technical College, which will offer remote workforce training opportunities exclusively for NTCA members. This agreement is one example of how we are pulling out the stops to help providers like yours bridge the digital divide.

Building a robust internet network requires a range of skills, but the work doesn't end after the first connections are installed. Maintaining the systems that power work-from-home jobs, telehealth and so much more demands highly skilled workers.

This new initiative with Wisconsin-based Northwood Tech will help NTCA members secure the expertise needed to not only accelerate broadband deployment but also sustain future-proof technologies.

Northwood Tech has several decades of innovative telecommunications and broadband training experience, but its Broadband Academy's focus extends beyond network systems, hardware and software. The consumer experience, and how communications professionals can better serve their customers, is also a priority.

Northwood Tech President John Will says the partnership with NTCA allows the school to reach and train more students and upskill employees who will gain industry-recognized digital badging credentials.

Also, the remote classes mean NTCA members and Northwood Tech will use broadband technology for broadband training. It's just one more example showing how fast internet service can make a difference in the nation's rural communities. 📡

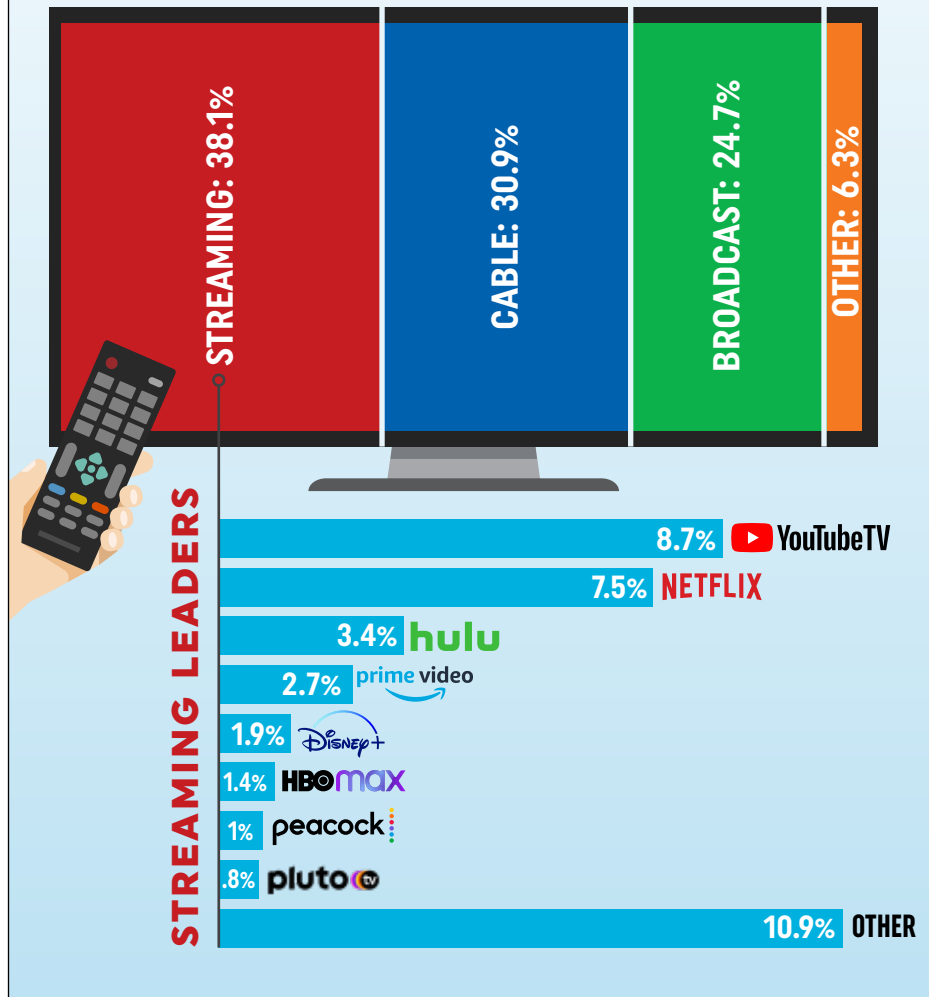
Entertainment riches

Viewers match their interest to the service

Whether you enjoy the predictable pace of a baseball game, catching a 30-minute comedy viewed when your schedule allows, watching a movie from your favorite genre — or just about any other entertainment choice — there's a wealth of options.

And today, you can design the viewing experience you want.

Nielsen, a company that measures audiences to provide important research to advertisers, released a report earlier this year that gives a peek into our viewing habits:



GAMING FAVORITES

For many people, a little screen time means something more interactive than a show or movie — they play video games. Nielsen identified some of the top games from recent months, so here are a few to consider if you're looking for fresh options.

- ▶ Hogwarts Legacy
- ▶ The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- ▶ Resident Evil 4
- ▶ Diablo IV
- ▶ Minecraft



Home security

KEEP YOUR DATA SAFE
WHILE WORKING REMOTELY



Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Working from home is no longer uncommon. As access to high-speed internet and tools for remote collaboration become more widespread, employers are increasingly warming to the idea of letting people get out of the office at least a few days a week.

The comfort and accessibility of remote work mean it isn't likely to go away anytime soon. But it can also introduce new challenges like security concerns. Whether you're taking your laptop to the nearby coffee shop or setting up a work station at home, keep these guidelines in mind to make sure your work is secure wherever you are.

STAY UPDATED

When you see an alert about a new software update, don't wait to install it. Among other things, these updates often close security loopholes that malware can use to get access to your data. It's also important to have an antivirus program installed that can protect your devices from the latest viruses, spyware and phishing scams.

DON'T TAKE THE BAIT

Speaking of phishing scams, it's important to be extra alert when working remotely. Bogus emails can hit an office just as easily as your home computer, but it's easier to spot a fake when the co-worker supposedly asking for sensitive information is in the same room as you. Always make sure your devices are secure outside the office, and be sure to double check any suspicious requests directly.

PROTECT WORK DEVICES

Working from home often means exposing your work devices to kids or other family members who may not be as careful about security measures as you are. Take steps to make sure others

aren't using your work devices or accidentally seeing sensitive information. Also, try to avoid doing work on personal devices that may not be as well-secured.

KEEP YOUR VPN ON

Many companies use virtual private networks, or VPNs, to help employees communicate securely via an encrypted network. If your employer does the same, it's important to stay connected for as long as you're working. Dropping that virtual defense could open the door for someone to steal important information.


STAY IN THE CLOUD

Not only do cloud applications receive regular security updates, but saving your work to cloud storage creates a shared backup of all your work. That way, even if local files on your device are lost, corrupted or stolen, you'll still have access to everything.

MAKE VIDEOCONFERENCES PRIVATE

The popularity of videoconferencing apps like Zoom has skyrocketed in recent years as more teams collaborate from afar. But a digital meeting space comes with additional security considerations. To prevent unwanted visitors from listening in or even trying to intimidate people, consider requiring a password for calls or keeping any new arrivals in a waiting room.

UP YOUR PASSWORD GAME

Strong passwords are always important, but they're even more crucial when you're working remotely. A password manager can help you keep track of numerous strong passwords, which should generally be at least 12 characters and contain letters, numbers and symbols. If that's too much to keep up with, consider using favorite song lyrics, movie quotes or other phrases that are easy to remember but more complex than your dog's name. 

Ready to serve

There for you when needed most

One of the pleasures of my role at HCTC is the honor of working alongside some of the most dedicated and hardworking professionals in our industry. We are blessed to have an experienced, committed staff devoted to serving you.



CRAIG COOK
Chief Executive Officer

Their efforts are most visible — and most critical — when times are the hardest. Sudden storms, flooding and so much more can disrupt not only the services we provide, but also the lives of individuals and productivity of businesses. We know you depend on our communications tools, especially in critical moments such as when you need to call for emergency help.

So, even in the most trying of conditions, our crews go into the field as our front line in the effort to keep you connected. They work tirelessly for as long as needed to restore service to you.

I'm always appreciative as these crews go out into environments most of us wish to avoid, including in the middle of downpours, high winds or extreme heat. The challenges change by season and are as unpredictable as the weather itself. But our commitment to

excellence means your service is as consistent and reliable as possible.

If you've ever wondered why someone would work so hard, the answer is simple. Each member of our crews — truly our entire staff — view each customer as a member of our HCTC family. We know we're working to help our friends, our families, our neighbors and our entire community. They genuinely care about those they serve.

When an outage does occur — and no matter the preventive steps we take they sometimes will — we ask for your patience as our crews hit the road to restore service. Also, as you're driving please keep in mind to take note of repair vehicles on the roadside. Please slow down and give them a little extra space. They're working to help everyone, and in return you can help keep them safe.

While repair crews are some of the most visible members of the HCTC team, others play equally critical roles. When problems arise, everyone helps. But I'd like to also mention a unique challenge unimagined when the first telephone calls crossed our lines.

The fast internet network we manage requires care, and our professionals work daily to keep it safe and secure. HCTC is your local hub on the global internet, connecting you to resources needed for health, education, employment, entertainment and far more.

Our teams keep that connection solid, a highly technical, always-evolving role. After all, cyberthreats are real, and we follow industry best practices to secure our network. But the responsibilities extend to the needs of individuals and business users. If you have an internet problem, our customer-support experts and technical staff are committed to helping.

Whether it's the immediate recovery after an event, such as a storm, or the day-to-day aid to keep critical services, like internet access, working, everyone at HCTC makes your needs the priority.

Thank you for letting us serve you and be a part of this wonderful community. 🗨️

The HCTC Connection is a bimonthly magazine published by Hill Country Telephone Cooperative © 2023. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.



HCTC is more than a provider of state-of-the-art telecommunications products and services. We are a member-owned cooperative with an elected board of directors who govern our organization using our bylaws, member input and business and industry conditions to guide their decisions. We are proud residents of the communities we serve, and we're dedicated to not only providing the best services possible, but doing so in a way that is ethical, safe and productive for our friends and neighbors. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Mission Statement: To be the premier provider of modern telecommunications and broadband services throughout our region.

Send address corrections to:

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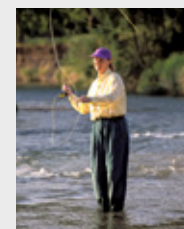
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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On the Cover:



Elizabeth Luna enjoys fly fishing in the South Llano River. The Texas State Parks system celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. See story Page 12.

Photo courtesy of South Llano River State Park

Congratulations
to all 2023 graduates!



HCTC wishes you the best in everything you do. We encourage you to embrace amazing opportunities in a world of possibilities!



2023 NOMINATIONS

Nominations for candidates to serve on the HCTC Board of Directors will open on Aug. 3, with the list of nominees posted by Aug. 18. Nominating petitions are due on or before Aug. 18. Qualifications and the process for nominating candidates for the board of directors can be found in HCTC's bylaws under sections 4.3 and 4.4. The cooperative's bylaws are available online at hctc.net or in the back of the May 2023 phone book.

DISTRICT 3 — Mountain Home and Garven Store

DISTRICT 6A — Comfort and Sisterdale

DISTRICT 7 — Center Point

DISTRICT 9 — Frio Canyon



★ MEMORIAL DAY ★

HONORING THOSE WHO
SERVED AND SACRIFICED

*In observance of Memorial Day,
the offices of HCTC will be closed on May 29.*

DELIBERATE DETOUR

EXPLORING TEXAS' FUNKY FESTIVALS AND CURIOUS ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Story by ANNE BRALY

The state of Texas is full of fun and wonderful people who love putting together festivals that make you scratch your head in wonder.

“Festivals, small towns and big celebrations are a winning combination in Texas,” says Tim Fennell, director for Travel Texas. “The state is known for being big and bold, and our festivals are

no exception. They reflect the diversity of Texas’ history, geography and culture, and travelers embrace that uniqueness.”

Some festivals around the Lone Star State started decades ago, as celebrations of the harvest or just as a way to bring people together. Whatever the reason, Texas has an abundance of festivals, each with its share of delights and many that

are out of the ordinary. “Travelers visiting the state will have no shortage of fun at our quirky annual events,” Tim says.

HERE ARE JUST A FEW:

Think mermaids are just a myth? Don’t say that to the townsfolk of San Marcos, where the beauties of the sea are celebrated each year at the **Mermaid Capital of Texas Fest**. The town is known for the funky spin it puts on many things, and the festival is no exception. You never know what eclectic floats will appear at the kickoff parade. Then hang around for the street fair. It lasts all day and includes live music, a juried art market and food vendors galore.

- ▶ Where: Around the grounds of the Historic Hayes County Courthouse
- ▶ When: Saturday, Sept. 23
- ▶ Information: visitsanmarcos.com

Prepare your palate for a hot time at the **Dallas ZestFest**. Anyone with a zest for life — and an appreciation of the hotter things on the menu — is invited to indulge



ABOVE: Mermaids gather at the Historic Hayes County Courthouse each year for the Mermaid Capital of Texas Fest.

LEFT: You never know who you’ll find riding a float in the kickoff parade for the mermaid festival in San Marcos.

Photos courtesy of Visit San Marcos

in a day of hot fun. ZestFest brings together some of the country's spiciest food exhibitors and products. There's also music, food samplings, cooking demonstrations, contests and a full lineup of events to add a little spice to your life.

- ▶ When: Sept. 29-Oct. 1
- ▶ Where: Dallas Market Hall, 2200 N. Stemmons Parkway
- ▶ Information: zestfest.net



Photo courtesy of Cultural Heritage Society



Photo courtesy of National Polka Festival

Always had a hankering to dance the polka? You can! You can also eat Czech food, tap your foot to the sounds of live bands — 17 of them in all — and totally immerse yourself in everything polka at the **National Polka Festival** in Ennis. It's a celebration of a culture that grew from a small hometown event to a nationally recognized one.

- ▶ When: May 26-28
- ▶ Where: Various venues around Ennis
- ▶ Information: nationalpolkafestival.com

The Wild West comes alive each year at the **Billy the Kid Festival** in the historic town of San Elizario, right outside El Paso. Grab your partner and watch as some of the West's most notorious outlaws break out of jail under a hail of bullets. It's a chance to step back in time for a day of Western adventure and events surrounding Billy the Kid's visit to this old Texas town in 1876. There'll be live music, plenty of food, cultural dancing and an original play, "Billy the Kid: 1876."

- ▶ When: June 2-4
- ▶ Where: 1556 San Elizario Road
- ▶ Information: visitelpaso.com

ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

There's a moment during every great road trip when you're driving along, completely unaware of what lies ahead, and you see something that makes you ask, "What is that doing here?" Here are four attractions along Texas roadsides worth stopping to see.

Beaumont has a piece of history from the Disney Corporation — a Dalmatian-spotted fire hydrant. Standing 24 feet high,

the hydrant is outside the entrance to The Fire Museum of Texas with its exhibits of bravery, heroism and the evolution of fire-fighting. Of note: The spots on the oversized hydrant are actually trademarked by Disney.

- ▶ Where to see it: 400 Walnut St., Beaumont

Retired Southern Pacific Railroad worker John Milkovich found an inventive siding for his house in **Houston**. He worked 18 years to cover his entire home and fence with flattened beer cans to create what is known as the Beer Can House. It's now open for weekend tours. Of note: "Ripley's Believe It Or Not" estimates it took more than 50,000 beer cans to complete the Beer Can House facade.

- ▶ Where to see it: 222 Malone St., Houston
- ▶ For tickets: full.orangeshow.org

Rockport has always been known for great fishing, and now, after four years of construction, it's landed a 6,000-pound blue crab that looks out over the waters of Little Bay. It's the third monstrous crab to grace the shoreline of Rockport, the other two having been destroyed by harsh weather conditions. It's a landmark and a favorite place for photos before heading out to wet a line or enjoy some of the fresh seafood in area restaurants.

- ▶ Where to find it: The Big Blue Crab lives at 1522 E. Laurel St.
- ▶ To learn more about the history of Big Blue Crabs in Rockport, visit rockportfun.com.



Photo courtesy of Beaumont Convention & Visitors Bureau



Photo courtesy of Discover Odessa

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Colorful dresses and traditional dances highlight the Billy the Kid Festival in San Elizario.

The National Polka Festival brings 17 polka bands to Ennis.

A 24-foot fire hydrant, complete with Dalmatian spots, greets visitors to The Fire Museum of Texas. Outside Odessa there is a nearly life-size replica of the ancient Stonehenge.

You don't have to travel to England to see Stonehenge. Just make your way to **Odessa** where you'll find a nearly life-size replica of the ancient structure with the same diameter as the original, and it's astronomically correct. It's an attraction for anyone interested in learning a little more about the beliefs of the ancient Druids.

- ▶ Where to find it: Preston Smith Road nestled in between the Home Depot and McDonald's. 📍

SOCIAL SAFE

Share memorable moments,
not private details

As spring wraps up and we're on the cusp of summer, memorable events are happening, and fun journeys are about to begin. From graduations to summer vacations, there are moments worth capturing in an image or as a written note.

And if an instant in time is worth noting, many people also choose to share it online through social media. There are many options, and most people have a favorite social media service. Each is a little different, though, in how it manages your information.

Following a few basic safety tips will keep your personal details safe as you share the adventures you enjoy.

1 Choose strong passwords and an additional form of authentication

A good password guideline is to include a mix of uppercase and lowercase letters, numbers and special characters. Another strategy is to use a long phrase you find memorable but can still confound hackers. Also, if available, enable two-factor authentication, which uses a unique code sent to your phone or email as an additional layer of security.

2 Don't overshare

Some information should always be off limits, including phone numbers, email addresses, places of employment and more. Review your social media account profiles to clarify exactly what information is visible on your accounts and who can see it. Is it everyone, family and friends, or no one? Choose the level right for you.

3 Be photo shy

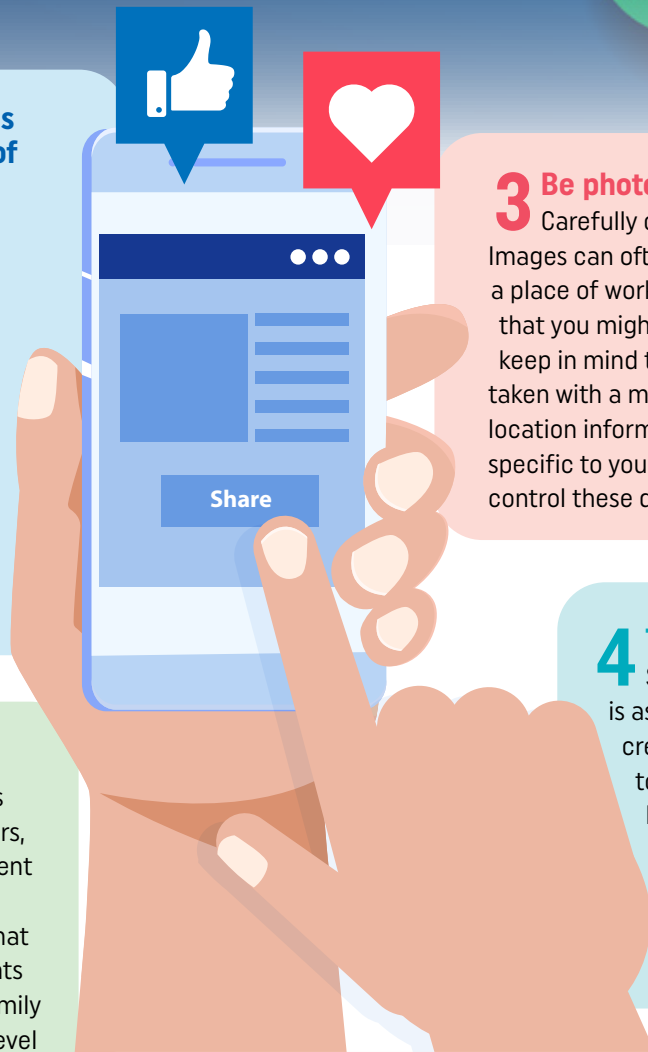
Carefully choose the photos you post. Images can often provide details such as a place of work, child's school and more that you might find best left private. Also, keep in mind that uploading an image taken with a mobile phone might contain location information. Review the settings specific to your device to learn how to control these details.

4 Treat strangers with care

Sadly, not everything on social media is as it seems. Scammers will even create bogus accounts to entice you to give up personal information. So, before you accept an interaction with someone on social media, first verify who is contacting you. When in doubt, block or ignore the request.

5 Wait until the end of the trip

While it's fun to share images of a trip during the journey, consider waiting until you are home. That way, you avoid broadcasting that your home is vacant. It's an easy, practical step.



The kinship of music

Kerrville Folk Festival still unites audiences after 50 years

Story by MORGAN SIMMONS

People don't come to the Kerrville Folk Festival simply to hear music. They also come to restore their faith in their fellow man.

For 50 years, this Hill Country gathering — which many view as more of a family reunion — has drawn seasoned performers and aspiring amateurs alike. The ranch where the festival takes place in late spring or early summer offers an ideal retreat where singer-songwriters can showcase their work, whether it be onstage in front of a weekend audience or around intimate campfires that burn through the night.

This year's Kerrville Folk Festival will be May 25 through June 11. Not only has the festival stayed alive for 50 years, but it's also expanded to last 18 consecutive days. Mary Muse, executive director and producer of the Kerrville Folk Festival Foundation, admits that's something of a challenge. "It started out at three days, then grew to five, and then 11," she says.

"On the festival's 25th anniversary, we had a 25-day fest, but went back to 18 days thereafter. I tell our volunteers and newcomers, 'This festival is a marathon, not a sprint.' You learn to pace yourself."

In addition to musical performances, the Kerrville Folk Festival offers Hill Country bike rides, canoe trips down the Guadalupe River, a songwriter school and workshops in ukulele, harmonica and guitar. "We often describe the festival as transformational and magical," Mary says. "Every festival is a reunion. During the festival, for 18 days, we become the second-largest community in Kerr County."

This year's Kerrville Folk Festival will include stage performances by Darrell Scott, Squirrel Nut Zippers, Matt Nakoa, Anaïs Mitchell and Mary Gauthier, to name a few.

One of the festival's proudest traditions is the Grassy Hill New Folk Competition, where some of the best emerging singer-songwriters from around the world receive valuable and sometimes career-launching

feedback from established songwriters. Two dozen songwriters are selected as finalists, and out of those, six are winners. Prizes include \$750 cash, an offer to perform at a future festival, a mentorship session with a professional songwriter and an invitation to join a Grassy Hill New Folk House Concert Tour in Texas the following year.

The New Folk Competition reflects the festival's take on modern folk music. Entries from genres like Celtic, gospel, Cajun, blues and global roots are welcome as long as the songs are original compositions.

Shannon Holt, marketing and retail manager for the Kerrville Folk Festival, first attended the event in 1986 when she was 5 years old. She says Kerrville has always stuck to its core value of supporting aspiring singer-songwriters by giving them a special place to play. "Our audiences are what keep Kerrville Folk Festival going," she says. "They appreciate good storytelling. They know a good song when they hear it." 🗨️



Photography contributed by Perspective Photography

Above: Austin-based band Shinyribs plays at the 50th annual Kerrville Folk Festival in 2022.

Left: Duo Hogan & Moss perform in 2022.

CHECK IT OUT!

For all the details on this year's Kerrville Folk Festival, including a full lineup, schedule and ticket packages, go to kerrvillefolkfestival.org. You can also follow the festival on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

HOW DOES YOUR ONLINE GARDEN GROW?

Digital communities revolutionizing backyard agriculture

Story by SARA D. PATTERSON

Starting a garden in your own backyard isn't something you have to do alone. While you're unlikely to find help digging holes, putting in plants or moving mulch on the internet, you can find countless friends online to offer advice and support.

Online communities have revolutionized gardening, according to Adriana Copaceanu, whose 2016 gardening blog grew into the website backyardgardenlover.com. More than 100,000 gardeners also turn to its Facebook page where they can exchange tips and experiences. "By making it easier for people to find information and connect with others online, gardening communities have made gardening more accessible and appealing to a wider audience," Adriana says. "In the last few years, the amount of information online on gardening and resources has absolutely skyrocketed."

More than half the country — 55% of American households — gardens, according to findings by Scotts Miracle-Gro. The average garden measures 600 square feet, and tomatoes are the most common plant grown, appearing in about 85% of U.S. gardens. In addition to providing produce for a healthier diet, gardening has many other positive impacts including stress relief, promoting exercise, fighting dementia and staving off loneliness, to name just a few.

CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES

While gardening has always offered opportunities for interactions at garden centers and at farmers markets, the online gardening community now presents limitless forums for collaboration. "I get daily emails with questions," Adriana says. "Sometimes, it's a quick answer, and other times I need to do some research because I'm not familiar with their specific location."

More than 5 million gardening enthusiasts have forged connections with other green thumbs through Reddit, a website that's home to thousands of online communities where users can anonymously discuss their interests and hobbies, seek support and share tips. They can also post photos and find immediate answers to questions like "I just pulled this dead squirrel out of my garlic patch, can I still eat the garlic in the summer?" or "Is this snake dangerous?"

"As the size of the gardening community has grown, there are more dumb and wrong answers; unfortunately, that's the nature of a platform that encourages participation," Reddit contributor kirbs2001 says. "The flip side is that more people are gardening and want to share what they know, or think they know, with others, and that's cool."

Still others just want a place to enjoy the outdoors in a community setting. "The gardening season is pretty short where I am, so



Photo by dprodi/Adobe Stock

Photo by Diederik/Adobe Stock

ONLINE RESOURCES ARE IN FULL BLOOM

Gardening apps

- * **From Seed to Spoon Gardening** — Created by new gardeners struggling to find all the right information for growing their first gardens, this covers it all.
- * **SunCalc** — This is a sun-finder for garden placement. Enter an address and the app will tell you where to plant.
- * **Homegrown with Bonnie Plants** — America's most-trusted vegetable company provides all the answers to questions about what to grow for specific conditions.
- * **Planty** — Not sure what you've grown? This cute, simple app will identify and offer care tips for plants.
- * **Garden Answers** — This extensive identification app provides garden and horticulture experts at your fingertips. The app identifies more than 20,000 plants and answers more than 200,000 commonly asked care questions.

Websites

- * The National Gardening Association's **garden.com** offers courses, gardening guides, a database and much more.
- * The Old Farmer's Almanac has tips, daily facts and information, and other tried-and-true suggestions at **almanac.com**.
- * Through its website **ahsgardening.org**, the American Horticulture Society promotes healthy, sustainable gardening practices and the critical role of plants.

“In the last few years, the amount of information online on gardening and resources has absolutely skyrocketed.”

— Adriana Copaceanu, founder of backyardgardenlover.com

I like to live vicariously through other people's gardens to get me through winter, lol,” says Calamity 0o0, another Reddit member who's active in the site's garden community.

Other gardening websites — including gardening-forums.com, gardenweb.com and gardenstew.com — offer all kinds of answers to all kinds of questions. Gardeners can also find like-minded friends on Twitter, and if it's easier to learn from videos, YouTube is for you.

The holy book of gardening and all things outdoors-related, The Old Farmer's Almanac, now offers a comprehensive website, almanac.com, full of valuable tips, along with a daily newsletter. The National Gardening Association formed in 1971 simply to promote gardening, and is now the largest

social media website dedicated exclusively to gardening. The group's garden.org offers online tools “to help gardeners connect, teach, share and trade with each other.”

Websites are great resources, but apps truly can be a gardener's best friend. First-time gardeners will find everything they need to start their plots through the Seed to Spoon app. Based on a home address, the SunCalc app designates the perfect location for plants to thrive, and Homegrown with Bonnie Plants has a “Help Me Choose” section to help gardeners determine which plants to grow, as well as one to help schedule tasks like sowing, watering, weeding and fertilizing.

So, while you may be on your own physically, you'll never lack for company along your gardening journey. 📱

Lasting

South Llano River joins Texas State Parks' centennial celebration

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Where cattle and goats once grazed and pecan trees loomed large, South Llano River State Park now draws around 80,000 visitors a year.

"We're a Hill Country gem," says Cody Edwards, superintendent of South Llano River State Park. "We just have a little bit of everything."

Today, the park has 58 campsites throughout its 2,600 acres. The South Llano River offers a number of activities in the park, and its backcountry offers "a traditional Hill Country experience," Edwards says. "You can go out there and see what the Texas Hill Country looked like before you got the big towns like Austin and San Antonio."

In April, South Llano joins the other 88 parks in Texas — covering 600,000 acres — in celebrating the park system's centennial. Then-Gov. Pat Neff established Texas State Parks in 1923. Most of the parks came into existence

during the Great Depression, through the Civilian Conservation Corps, to create government jobs for struggling Texans.

"As staff at Texas State Parks, our mission is to preserve and conserve the natural and cultural resources for present and future generations," Edwards says. "The other 50% of our mission is to provide access to those resources, and I think we do it all here. We do it well."

FROM RANCH TO STATE PARK

South Llano River State Park opened in 1990. It sits on the ranch once owned by the late Walter White Buck Jr., on property where he raised cattle and goats and harvested pecans. He donated the land to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1977.

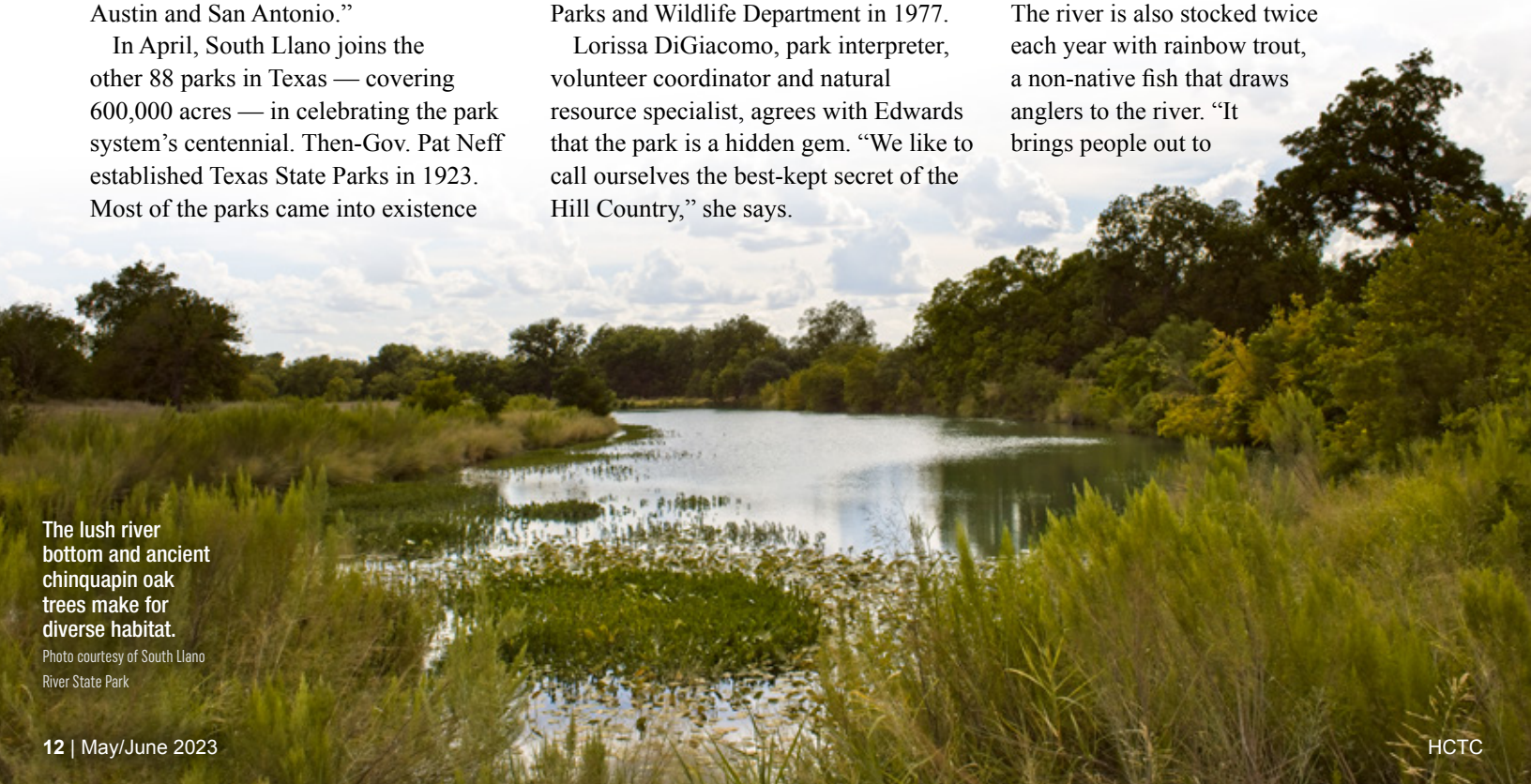
Lorissa DiGiacomo, park interpreter, volunteer coordinator and natural resource specialist, agrees with Edwards that the park is a hidden gem. "We like to call ourselves the best-kept secret of the Hill Country," she says.

The park has around 26 miles of hiking and biking trails, a large portion located in the backcountry, which DiGiacomo describes as "just gorgeous." Closer to the river are the large pecan trees that remain from Buck's day.

RECREATION ON THE RIVER

The South Llano River has never run dry and is the main draw of the park, DiGiacomo says. It is an outdoors enthusiast's paradise — about 20 miles of the river are not dammed, which enables fish to move more freely and gives anglers access to more species of fish.

The Guadalupe bass, Texas' native bass, can be found in the South Llano. The river is also stocked twice each year with rainbow trout, a non-native fish that draws anglers to the river. "It brings people out to



The lush river bottom and ancient chinquapin oak trees make for diverse habitat.

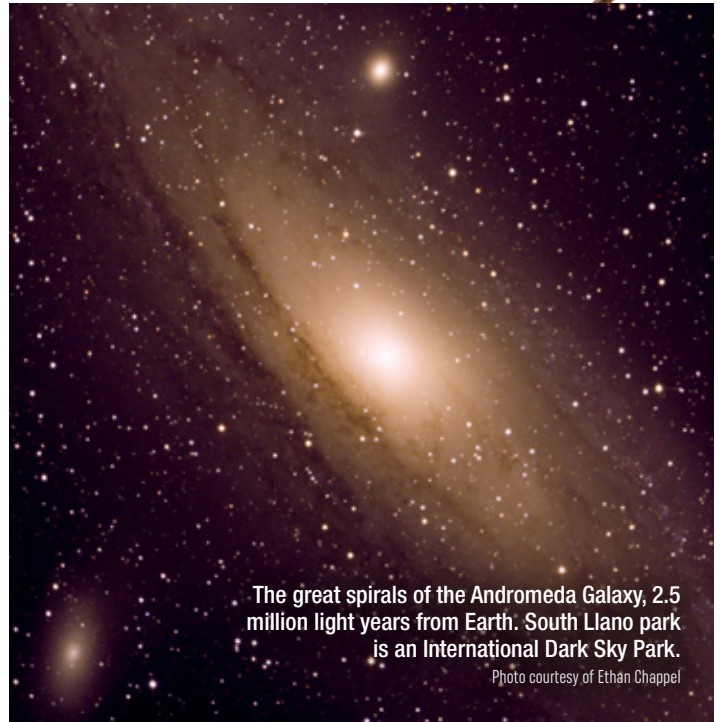
Photo courtesy of South Llano River State Park

legacy

A lesser goldfinch finds shade on a branch.
Photo courtesy of South Llano River State Park



Even the wildlife takes a moment to soak in the view.
Photo courtesy of South Llano River State Park



The great spirals of the Andromeda Galaxy, 2.5 million light years from Earth. South Llano park is an International Dark Sky Park.
Photo courtesy of Ethan Chappel

the park and gets them to recreate, and it gets them to have a good time outside,” DiGiacomo says. She offers a number of activities throughout the year, ranging from hiking to exploring the river to practicing prehistoric hunting skills.

South Llano’s tubing route is about an hour long. Tubes are available for rent at the park, and sandals are recommended, as it’s a walking tube route, DiGiacomo says. Outfitters in and around Junction provide kayak rentals.

The park also boasts four bird blinds and draws a number of bird-watchers, especially in the springtime. The blinds are seeded daily and water features are refilled to keep the avian population happy and close.

If that’s not enough, the park is also an International Dark Sky Park as

designated in 2017 by the International Dark-Sky Association. Visitors head to South Llano because it’s so dark that they can distinguish the Milky Way, the Orion Nebula and other celestial bodies that can’t be seen in the city due to light pollution. DiGiacomo hosts star parties at the park with local astronomers who share their telescopes with others.


CELEBRATING A CENTURY

South Llano’s celebration of the Texas State Parks’ centennial was held last month. A group of Ford Model Ts were at the park to re-create a historic photo of the Buck family’s Model T in the pecan grove.

Agora goats will also return to the park where Buck once raised his herd. Visitors will learn about the goats and

their importance to the wool and mohair industry. Information about Buck and his history in the area will be available, and a local quilting guild will talk about the importance of quilting. Representatives from Texas Tech University will also attend the event to share information about their programs and activities. DiGiacomo is also working to bring the local farmers market to the event.

“I’m really excited about it,” DiGiacomo says. “It’s going to be an open house, so people can come and go as they please.”

The South Llano River State Park shares details on upcoming events on its Facebook and Instagram pages. Park events are also listed on the Texas Parks and Wildlife’s website, tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/south-llano-river. 

Bite-size brilliance

A not-so-spicy meatball!

Few foods have the versatility that meatballs offer. They're perfect for parties served with toothpicks, but they can also be your dinner tonight served over pasta or mashed potatoes.

What makes a good meatball? Some recipes call for chicken or veal while others rely solely on ground beef. Some recipes call for frying them in a skillet while others send them straight to the oven.

No matter the approach to the finished product, most everyone can agree on one thing: Meatballs are a blessing in the culinary world all wrapped up in a ball of meat.



SWEET-AND-SOUR MEATBALLS

Sauce:

- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1/3 cup pineapple juice
- 1/4 teaspoon Chinese five-spice
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch

Place the brown sugar, vinegar, ketchup, soy sauce, pineapple juice and Chinese five spice in a saucepan over medium heat. Simmer for 5 minutes or until the sugar has dissolved. Stir in cornstarch and simmer for 2 minutes more to thicken. Remove from heat and set aside.

Meatballs:

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (1-pound) bag frozen meatballs
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 red or green bell pepper, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1 cup diced pineapple
- 4 green onions, cut into 1-inch pieces

Place a wok or large frying pan over high heat. Add the oil and the meatballs and cook, turning every minute or so, for 4-5 minutes or until almost cooked through. Add the onion and stir-fry for another 2 minutes. Add the bell pepper and stir-fry for another minute, then add the pineapple and the sweet-and-sour sauce. Stir-fry until well combined. Remove from heat and toss in the green onion.



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Photography by *Mark Gilliland*
Food Styling by *Rhonda Gilliland*

SALISBURY STEAK MEATBALLS

- 1/4 cup grated onion
- 2/3 cup panko bread crumbs
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon onion powder
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons ground mustard
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- 1 1/4 pounds ground beef
- 1 tablespoon olive oil (plus more, if needed)

Gravy:

- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 6-8 medium mushrooms, chopped
- 1/2 cup onion, sliced 1/4-inch thick
- 4-6 cloves garlic, minced

- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 cups beef stock
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce

In a medium bowl, combine grated onions, breadcrumbs, salt and all the remaining ingredients except the ground beef and oil. Allow the mixture to stand for 5 minutes, then add the meat and mix until just combined and divide the mixture into about 20 meatballs.

Add oil in a large skillet and heat to medium-high. Add the meatballs in a single layer and cook for about 10 minutes, flipping halfway through, until all sides brown evenly. Remove to a plate. If needed, add additional oil and cook any

remaining meatballs the same way.

For the gravy, add 1 tablespoon of butter to the skillet. When melted, add mushrooms and cook 3-4 minutes. Add the onions and saute for 3 minutes, add the garlic and let cook for 30 seconds or until fragrant. Add the remaining butter to the skillet. When melted, add the flour and stir to combine and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Gradually pour in the beef stock, still stirring constantly. Stir in Worcestershire sauce, Dijon and soy sauce and simmer for 3 minutes or until it thickens slightly. Add the meatballs to the skillet along with any juices that may have collected on the plate and cook for 4 minutes. If the gravy thickens too much, add a splash of water. Taste and adjust seasonings as desired.

BUTTERY CHICKEN MEATBALLS

- 1/2 medium onion, grated
- 1/2 cup panko breadcrumbs
- 1 1/2 pounds ground chicken
- 1 egg
- 2 teaspoons garam masala
- 2 tablespoons freshly chopped parsley
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper
- 1 tablespoon olive oil

Butter sauce:

- 1/2 cup butter
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1 cup tomato sauce
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon garam masala
- 1 tablespoon smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon freshly chopped parsley

Mix the onion and bread-crumbs together in a large

mixing bowl. Let the mixture sit for 2-3 minutes. Add the rest of the meatball ingredients, excluding the oil, to the bowl. Mix everything together well. Form the mixture into meatballs.

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the meatballs, working in batches if needed. Cook for 2-3 minutes per side until well browned. Transfer the cooked meatballs to a plate and set aside.

For the sauce, add the butter to the skillet, then stir in garlic and ginger and cook for 1 minute. Add the tomato sauce, tomato paste, garam masala, smoked paprika, turmeric, cumin, coriander and chicken broth. Bring the sauce to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook for 10 minutes or until slightly thickens. Stir in the cream. Return meatballs to skillet and let them simmer in the sauce until heated through. Garnish with parsley and serve. 🍴





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